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SUBJECT: REACTION TO SOLANA'S DAMASCUS VISIT MIXED

REF: 06 DAMASCUS 05447

Classified By: CDA Michael Corbin, for reasons 1.4 b/d.

¶1. (C) Summary: European diplomats, including German Ambassador Wenzel, stressed the frank and generally positive nature of EU Representative Solana's talks with Syrian President Asad, especially with regard to Lebanon. In addition, Syrian state media put a mostly positive spin on the visit, asserting that the Europeans had finally realized their policy of pressuring the SARG for change had failed. The Syrian opposition registered its disappointment with Solana's visit and fear that "a deal" is in the offing that would cause the Europeans to weaken their commitment to Syrian civil society and promoting human rights. End Summary.

¶2. (U) EU High Representative for Common Foreign Policy and Security Policy Javier Solana visited Damascus on March 14 as part of a regional trip that also included Lebanon and Saudi Arabia. Solana met separately with President Bashar Asad, Vice President Farouk al-Shara'a, and Foreign Minister Walid Mu'allim. Solana then briefed EU ambassadors and held a joint press conference with Mu'allim.

¶3. (C) German Ambassador Wolkmar Wenzel and other German diplomats, said Solana's March 14 trip was designed to present a united European position to the Syrians on important regional issues such as Iraq and Lebanon. Wenzel stressed that Solana's separate meetings with Asad, al-Shara'a and Mu'allim were generally positive and they were characterized by a frank exchange, especially with regard to Lebanon. (Note: According to Wenzel, the meeting with al-Shara'a was not as cordial as the others. End Note.) According to one mid-level German diplomat, Solana was able to hear parts of the Syrian argument that he had not previously heard. For instance, according to Wenzel, President Asad spent a long time trying to defend Syria's actions in Lebanon to Solana. At one point, Asad told Solana that Hezbollah is defending UNIFIL from al-Qaeda, Wenzel said.

¶4. (C) Wenzel also noted that German Deputy State Secretary in the Federal Ministry of the Interior August Hanning, who is the former head of German intelligence, had visited Syria March 6 and was struck by the level of concern in the Syrian government over internal security, especially as expressed by Minister of Interior Bassam Abdel Majid. Although Wenzel did not go into details about the Hanning visit, the concern in the Syrian government seems to match the concern Asad expressed in general terms to visiting CoDELS in December (reftel) that internal Syrian stability was being affected in different ways by developments in Iraq.

¶ 5. (U) Syrian state-run media focused on the positive aspects of the visit. The Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) coverage of the joint Solana-Mu'allim press conference focused on Solana's expression of EU support for Syria's right to have returned the occupied Golan, to the Line of June 4, 1967. SANA also reported that Solana expressed hope that Syria would help resolve ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Lebanon. In contrast, the semi-independent Syrian daily al-Watan reported that Asad told Solana that Syria will only cooperate fully with the EU and the US when it is in Syria's interests. Al-Watan went on to report that Asad told Solana that Syria was no longer interested in an Association agreement with the EU.

¶ 6. (C) Some in the Syrian opposition have expressed confusion and consternation at the Solana visit. While not automatically opposed to EU engagement with the Syrian regime, some civil society activists told poloff they could not understand the logic behind the Solana visit or the long-range goal of the EU toward Syria. Others in the closely monitored Syrian opposition told poloff they assumed that the EU is overlooking the internal situation in Syria in favor of regional stability. (Note: A mid-level source at the German Embassy said it did not seem that Solana raised any internal issues, such as elections. End Note.)

CORBIN